What is a "TMDL?"

FACT SHEET

A Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) is developed by the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) to determine the total amount of a pollutant that a waterbody can handle without resulting in its impairment. Think of it as a pollution diet.

Why does DEQ develop TMDLs?
A TMDL is developed to help restore a waterbody that is considered impaired through DEQ's Water Quality Monitoring and Assessment Program.

When does a TMDL become necessary?
DEQ monitors rivers, lakes and tidal waters across Virginia to see if they're clean enough for swimming and fishing as well as other uses. Waterbodies that don't meet Virginia Water Quality Standards (e.g., because of high bacteria counts) are included on an impaired waters list, which is published every two years in the agency's Integrated Report. These waterbodies are considered for TMDL development, or a pollution diet.

What factors go into developing a TMDL?
During TMDL development, DEQ identifies sources of pollution and the reductions needed, which can include residential, municipal or industrial discharges as well as residential, urban or agricultural stormwater runoff.

Can the public participate in the TMDL development process?
Public input is sought when deciding what impaired waterbodies should be placed on DEQ's TMDL Priorities List and also during the development stage of each TMDL. You can learn more about public participation here.

Can I recommend any waterbody for inclusion on the TMDL Priorities List?
No. A TMDL can only be developed for a waterbody that has been identified as impaired through the Water Quality Monitoring and Assessment process and is included on the impaired waters list. You can find the current list here. If the waterbody you'd like considered for a TMDL isn't on the list, you can recommend its inclusion in DEQ's monitoring program during the public comment period.

How can I provide feedback on the TMDL Priorities List?
You'll have the opportunity to provide input on waterbodies to consider for inclusion on the TMDL Priorities List as well as factors for DEQ to consider in prioritizing waters. You'll also be able to provide public comment on the final TMDL Priorities List prior to it being submitted to EPA as part of DEQ's Integrated Report. The chart below has more details on the timeline.

Timeline for Development of 2022-2028 TMDL Priorities

Early Informal Public Input Opportunity	Aug. 31-Sept. 30, 2020
DEQ Review of Input and Development of TMDL Priority List	Fall 2020
Formal Public Notice and Comment on Draft TMDL Priorities List	Spring 2021-Summer 2021
DEQ Review of Comments and Finalizing of Priorities List	Fall/Winter 2021
DEQ Submission of Priorities List to EPA	Spring 2022
Final Priority List Becomes Effective	October 1, 2022

What does DEQ do with public input during the compilation stage of the TMDL Priorities List?
The compilation stage is an informal, listening step, so public comment is considered but not individually addressed. However, DEQ seeks public comment on the draft TMDL Priorities List once it's completed, at which time there is a public meeting and substantive comments are formally addressed.

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Why does DEQ develop a TMDL Priorities List?
Given the scope, resources and costs for developing TMDLs, DEQ must prioritize when waterbodies are scheduled for TMDL development, as is the case in other states. This is based on the 2013 national vision for assessment, restoration and protection of waters, which you can read more about here.

What happens after a TMDL is developed for a waterbody?
Once a TMDL is developed, the allowable pollutant amount for permitted discharges is implemented through permits. DEQ also develops a plan to address pollutants not covered by permits. During this stage, DEQ works with the public to create an implementation plan to address impairments through the voluntary implementation of best management practices.

What waterbodies already have a TMDL?
You can find waterbodies that already have a TMDL here.

How does a TMDL address water quality in Virginia?
Virginia has implemented several programs and requirements to address water quality – from setting limits on discharges from large sources, to addressing stormwater runoff and providing funding for water quality improvement projects. One element of Virginia's efforts to evaluate and improve water quality is through the water quality monitoring, assessment and TMDL process. For more information on water quality monitoring and programs, click here.

What is a TMDL alternative?
TMDLs have specific requirements that ensure a rigorous evaluation is conducted to develop an appropriate cleanup plan. While this is a tried and true process, it can be time consuming and expensive, possibly delaying water quality improvements. On the other hand, TMDL alternatives are nuanced watershed restoration plans aimed at getting cleaner water faster. In certain cases, the characteristics of the watershed or the impairment may allow for the use of a TMDL alternative. For example, if the watershed draining to an impaired waterbody is small or if the sources contributing to the impairment are few, a TMDL alternative may meet water quality standards faster than a TMDL.

Where can I find more information about the Water Quality Monitoring and Assessment Process and waterbodies on the impaired list?
You can learn more about this program here and view the current list here.

Where can I learn more about the TMDL development process?
You can find more information about the TMDL development process on DEQ's website.